
Obituary

Don Paul Fowler

1953–1999

On 15 October 1999, the world of classical scholarship lost one of its most exciting and colourful figures with the tragically early death, at the age of 46, of Don Fowler. Don was an early adopter and enthusiastic champion of new technologies, and had been involved with CTI, and indeed with humanities computing in Oxford, from early days. Don was a student on one of the first courses on SNOBOL taught by Susan Hockey, and while still a PhD student wrote his own programs for the metrical analysis of Lucretius. Don was involved in the first CTI project at OUCS, the CTI-Phase 1 funded Oxford Text Searching System. I met Don when I arrived to take up my post as the first research officer in the CTI Centre for (as it was then) Literature and Linguistic Studies. Don was on the Management Committee of the Centre, and he continued to serve on the Management Committee, and later on the Advisory Board of what became the CTI Centre for Textual Studies, until his death.

From my very first acquaintance with him, Don was unfailingly kind, helpful, and supportive, and I am proud to have been able to count him as a colleague and as a friend. Don's range of interests was prodigious: for several years from 1992 the CTI Centre and Office for Humanities Communication held an annual series of seminars, which Don hosted for us at Jesus College. He attended almost every one of these, and whatever the topic he had a pertinent comment, and a searching question, whether it was on classics, computers and anthropology, new library methods or whatever. He is, however, best remembered for always having the wine poured on time at the end of these seminars!

In 1996, Don wrote, researched, and presented a series of programmes on BBC Radio 4 called 'A History of Reading in Five Chapters' which looked at the practice of reading from the earliest period of literacy to the age of the internet, and I was pleased to be able to work with him on two of the programmes. Don's erudition and his humour came across most tellingly in this series, which was exciting, wide-ranging, and very well received.

Don was a great political force in the establishment of humanities computing in Oxford, championing new developments on committees throughout the University. He also integrated new technologies firmly into his own teaching and introduced courses based entirely on creating and editing texts on the web. Don was always prepared to risk more than most of us in an attempt to push the technologies further and faster: who else would have beamed a lecture into an Oxford conference from Pennsylvania via a web camera or broadcast Alessandro Barchiesi's 1998 lectures on the Internet in RealAudio?

Don was one of the most amusing people I have ever met, with a ready wit and a keen sense of self-parody. The tales he told against himself about his well-known failings in driving a car, for instance, could have one weeping with laughter. His humour never failed him even in the last painful days of his life, which he faced with great courage. Don Fowler was a very special human being, and he is much missed by all of us who were privileged to know him.

Marilyn Deegan